

JOSEPH ANDORFER EWAN
OCTOBER 24, 1909 – DECEMBER 5, 1999
A MEMOIR

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*Tulane University Herbarium
Dept. of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology
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The lights were back on, projection equipment was being put away, when a man with a neat white goatee, twinkling eyes, and the most active eyebrows one can imagine said "That's such a good show, you need to know all the plant names. I can help you!" After dinner the following week, Professor Ewan, who would become my mentor and friend, did just that; adding names to flowers in the slide show used in a seven-year, finally-successful effort to have two small Mississippi barrier islands added to the National Wilderness System. By the time the campaign was over, I had taken all the botany courses offered at Tulane, wound up with a master's degree, and found a new career.

For over thirty years, Professor Ewan touched the lives and minds of Tulane students. None of the hundreds of students who enrolled in biology 431 (Plant Systematics in the catalogue but really a course in "Plant Appreciation") could ever walk across the campus in the same way. Their eyes had been opened to a world of wonder. Music, art, and his beloved history were woven into plant biology. You never missed a Ewan lecture, nor forgot one!

For one whose focus would be the history of science, Joseph Ewan left a remarkably thin personal paper trail. The facts of his life are scant and not easy to find. Born in Philadelphia, educated in Los Angeles, he received an A.B. degree in botany from the University of California, Berkeley in 1934. In 1935, he married Ada Nesta Dunn, a fellow student who shared many of his interests and his life for the next 64 years. They had three daughters: Kathleen, Dorothy, and Marjorie and five grandchildren. He was an instructor at the University of Colorado (1937–1944), botanist with the Foreign Economic Administration (1944–1945), Assistant Curator, Smithsonian Institution (1945–1946) and Associate Botanist, Bureau of Plant Industry, U.S. department of Agriculture (1946–47). In 1947, he came to Tulane as an Assistant Professor, moved steadily up the academic ladder, and in 1972 was named the Ida Richardson Professor of Botany, a chair he held until 1977 when he was appointed Emeritus Professor. For nearly forty years, Tulane students, faculty, and staff members were exposed to his mind, his vast knowledge, and his enigmatic wit.

Along the way, Ewan was a Guggenheim Fellow (1954), a National Science Foundation Fellow (1959–61), a Smithsonian Regents' Fellow (1984), and held visiting professorships at the Universities of Hawaii and Oregon, and at the Ohio State University.

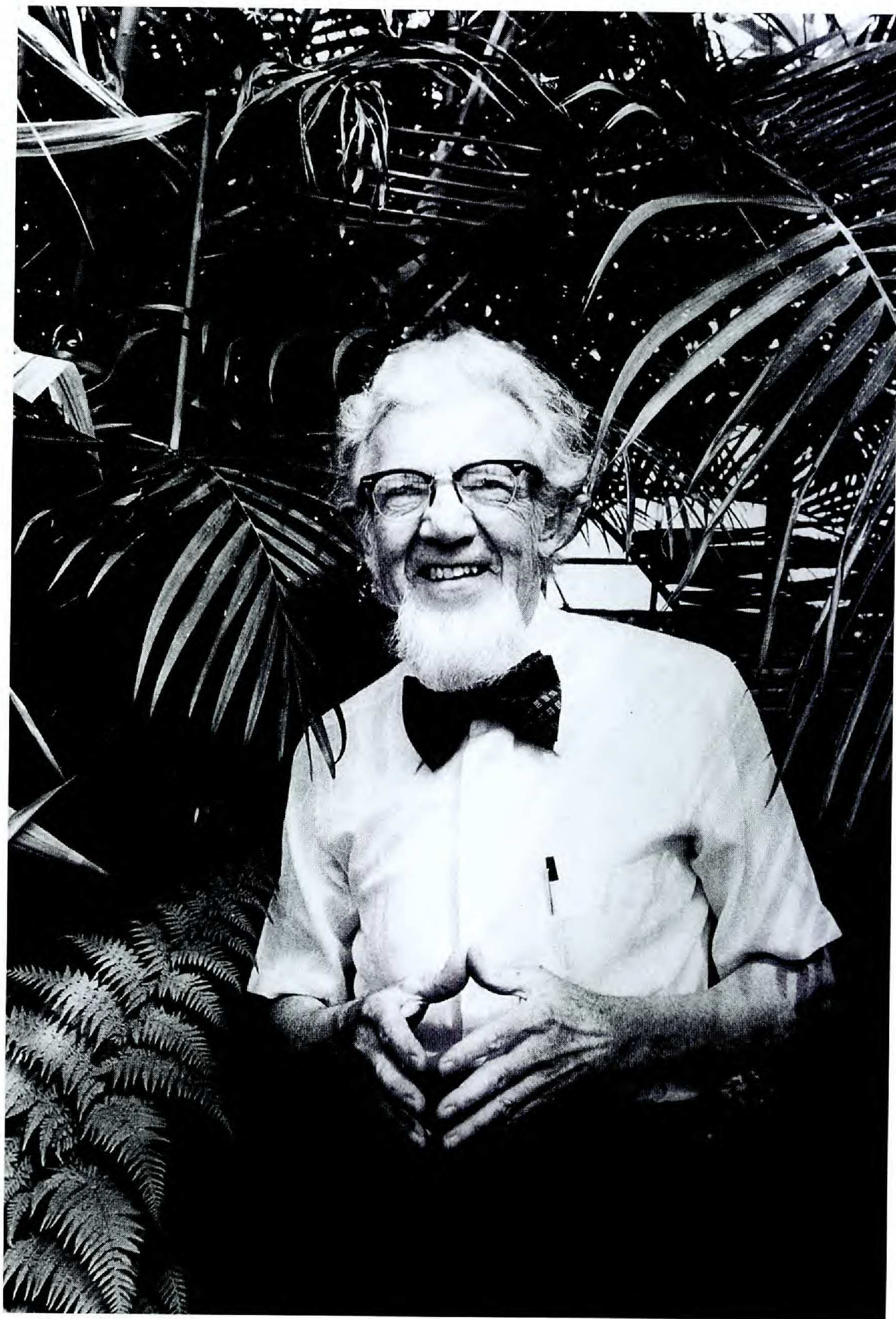
He received the Founders Medal from the Society for the History of Natural History, London in 1977, the Elosie Payne Luquer Medal from the Garden Club of America in 1978, and with his wife Nesta Dunn Ewan, the Henry Shaw Medal from the Missouri Botanical Garden in 1994. Ewan was an elected Fellow of the Linnean Society of London. The Botanical Society of America awarded him a Certificate of Merit in 1989. The College of William and Mary and Tulane University awarded him honorary doctorates.

"A bite of immortality" is the Ewanian concept of publication. His own first "bite", at age 19, was *A Report on the California Black Rail in Los Angeles County* published in *Condor*. His early botanical interests focused on ferns, and he was President of the American Fern Society in 1951. Taxonomic studies on *Delphinium* and other Gentianaceae followed but his interest had always been captivated by biogeography, bibliography, and history of biology and by the time I became his student in the early 1970's, history had completely replaced taxonomy in his research. Questions to Ewan were most frequently answered by questions and one left his office burdened with books. He believed books were to be used, and was always generous with his personal library. As a new graduate student, I remember being awe struck when he handed down from above his rickety desk, a beautiful vellum copy of Bauhin's *Prodromus* with the disclaimer that it was only the second edition from 1671. Back in my cubicle, I was afraid to open it!

Other samples from his "bites" include such tempting titles as: "From Calcutta and New Orleans, or tales from Barton's greenhouse", "Roots of the California Botanical Society", "Who Conquered the World? or four centuries of exploration in an indehiscent capsule", and "The Botany of Cook's Voyages; or around the world on six shillings a day."

Then there are his many contributions to *The Dictionary of Scientific Biography* where one finds, among others, sketches of George Engelmen, Albert Spear Hitchcock, Elmer Drew Merrill, Frederick Pursh, and the irascible Constantine Samuel Rafinesque. His introductions to the *Classica Botanica Americana* series are classics themselves. As a book reviewer, Ewan was in constant demand. His writings into his venue were always tantalizing. As in "A good beginning is the true story of nine pigs driven 71 miles by a peon carrying a pine torch" which certainly tempts one to dip into Archie Carr's *High Jungles and Low*. Or "How can you know the gardens of the deep south without this book close to the hammock?" and the fact that its author is "not frightened by information" makes one want to dash out to acquire Charlotte Seidenberg's *The New Orleans Garden*.

Perhaps more meaty "bites" are his books. *Rocky Mountain Naturalists* (1950), its follow-up, *Biographical Dictionary of Rocky Mountain Naturalists* (1981), and *John Banister and His Natural History of Virginia* (1970) the later two co-authored by his wife, Nesta Dunn Ewan. In 1969 Ewan edited *A Short History of Botany in the United States* and contributed the Calendar of Events and chapters on Early History and Plant Geography. Here he graphically illustrated the "Role of the Bartrams in natural History" for Ewan believed William Bartram's contributions central to the development of botany in the United States. His *William Bartram and His Botanical and Zoological Drawings* was published by the American Philosophical Society in 1968 and the Ewans' monumental biography of Philadel-



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phia botanist Benjamin Smith Barton will be published posthumously by the Missouri Botanical Garden.

In 1986, the Ewans moved from Tulane. The Missouri Botanical Garden had bought his prodigious library and given them a new home. There they were housed in the old museum building and for the first time the Ewans had spacious working conditions with large double desks for each of them and his 4,500 books carefully catalogued and shelved within easy reach. In announcing the move, Peter Raven, Director of the Garden, said "The Joseph Ewan collection is an extremely valuable acquisition for the Garden. The historical significance of the collection, its relevance to the work we do, and the respect Joseph Ewan commands in the scientific community make this announcement one of the most exciting I've made while at the Garden."

We at Tulane are left with his name on the door, lots of happy memories, and his herbarium now over 110,000 specimens. Just last week we received a request from Switzerland for Tulane's holdings of *Macrocarpaea*, a genus monographed by Ewan in 1948. As I compose on the Pentium, in my mind's ear, I can still hear the clicking of his manual typewriter which sounded in the same room for so many years.

The 1989 *Ewania: The Writings of Joe and NESTA Ewan* lists 358 "bites of immortality." The following ten years produced many other "bites." Surely a veritable feast for generations of botanists, natural historians, and biogeographers in the generations to come.